



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

1930 Ninth Avenue
Helena, MT 59601
PH: 406.4HEALTH or 406.443.2584
Fax: 406.457.8990

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Melissa Baker, Cancer Screening Program Coordinator, 406-457-8923,

mbaker@lccountymt.gov

Gayle Shirley, Communications Coordinator, 406-457-8908, gshirley@lccountymt.gov

March Reminder: Screening for Colorectal Cancer Saves Lives

March is National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, a time to stop and reflect on the fact that cancer of the rectum and the large intestine, or colon, is the fourth most common cause of cancer deaths in Montana. About 500 of our friends, neighbors, relatives, and colleagues are diagnosed with this disease each year. It kills about 170 of them.

Yet, as many as 60 percent of colorectal cancer deaths could be prevented if all men and women age 50 or older were screened routinely, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Colorectal Screening

Sure, no one likes the idea of a colonoscopy, but this form of screening is less painful, frightening, costly, and time-consuming than a case of colorectal cancer. And there are other types of screening, such as stool tests, that are effective yet less invasive and costly.

In most cases colorectal cancer develops from precancerous polyps, or growths, in the colon or rectum. During screening, a physician can find these polyps and remove them before they turn into cancer. People who have polyps or colorectal cancer often have no symptoms, especially in the early stages.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends screening for all men and women aged 50 to 75 – even earlier if you have an increased risk due to personal or family history or other risk factors.

Recommended screenings include:

- High-sensitivity fecal occult blood testing (FOBT) or fecal immunochemical test (FIT) every year, or
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy (every 5 years) with high-sensitivity FOBT (every 3 years).
- Colonoscopy every 10 years.

Many insurance plans and Medicare help pay for colorectal cancer screening tests. You should check with your plan or call 1-800-MEDICARE to find out which tests are covered for you.

If you're unable to pay for a colorectal cancer screening test, you may be eligible for free screening through the Montana Cancer Screening Program. This program is open to people who are uninsured or underinsured and who meet age and income guidelines. Residents of Lewis and Clark, Broadwater,

Jefferson, and Meagher counties can learn more by calling the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department at 457-8923.

Be sure to check with your doctor or other health-care provider to find out whether colorectal cancer screening is appropriate for you.

Other Preventive Measures

There are other steps you can take to help reduce your chances of getting colorectal cancer.

Some studies show that increased physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight may lower your risk of many diseases, including this one. There's no consensus yet on the role of diet, but medical experts recommend eating a diet low in animal fats and high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products to reduce the risk of other chronic diseases, like diabetes and heart disease. It's also a good idea to limit your alcohol intake.

Still, the most effective way to reduce your risk is by having regular colorectal cancer screening tests beginning at age 50. They could save your life.